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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1993, a study was begun on how adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) students reacted to working in groups. The research was conducted through a joint vocational school's ABLE program using three target groups at two of its ABLE centers. The groups met two times per week and were facilitated by three different teachers. More than 40 students participated in the groups. One teacher observed a group session in progress, taking notes on one certain focus for the day. The teacher who did the teaching wrote a self-reflection about the observed lesson. Findings indicated that ABLE students truly enjoyed working in groups. Field notes revealed five principal indicators of enjoyment: participation, human bonding, positive increase in individual behavior, motivation, and physical signs of enjoyment. In 18 of 25 sessions there was 100 percent participation. The openness with which participants shared their private lives indicated a feeling of comfort and security within the confines of the group setting. As the sessions continued and the students familiarized themselves with one another, members' self-esteem increased. As self-confidence grew, so did student motivation. Perhaps the most significant motivating factor was the manner in which a group of strangers became a cohesive, critical-thinking, problem-solving entity. (YLB)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

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POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF GROUP LEARNING IN THE ABLE CLASSROOM

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By *Beverly J. Crites* and *Gail Kaylor McKenna*

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Currently in Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE), where one-on-one teaching is the primary method of instruction, a strong interest is developing in the benefits of group learning on ABLE students. Most adult students believe they learn best by working alone or working one-on-one with a teacher. Working in a group requires the ABLE student to face the fear of rejection and the even greater fear of looking foolish or not "knowing" as much as the other group members. Group work can be frightening for the most secure student, let alone the many ABLE students who have experienced educational failure so often that they assume educational success is an achievement they will never experience.

Why, then, is the push on in the field of adult education to move from the individualized learning curriculum now being used to one that is based upon collaborative and/or cooperative learning? Because, friends, the research is in, and it says that ABLE students love working in groups!

In the fall of 1993, through an Ohio Literacy Resource Center research and development grant, we began research on how ABLE students react to working in groups. The research was conducted through the Maplewood Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) program using three target groups at two of its ABLE centers. The groups met two times a week and were facilitated by three different teachers: Joanne Burkhart, Beverly Crites, and Gail Kaylor McKenna.

More than 40 students participated in the groups. One of the groups was an SOS (Steps of Success) Workshop which operated under certain requirements from the Department of Human Services JOBS program. All participants were enrolled in the JOBS program, and their attendance was mandatory. SOS groups met on-site, two hours a day, four days a week for a total of 16 hours of group time. If a student missed more than one class, he/she was required to repeat the entire 16 hours the next time SOS was offered. The only exception to this rule was if the student obtained employment. The SOS Workshops addressed various life skills such as self-awareness, goal setting, communication, conflict management, and time and stress management.

The other two groups were comprised of both ABE and GED students. One of the groups established mandatory attendance guidelines (unless the student was testing), and the other group operated on a volunteer attendance basis. For the most part, group sessions were held on the same days and at the same time every week. The curriculum for group activities centered on the five GED subject areas: English/Writing,

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Social Studies, Science, Literature and Math, along with additional National Issues Forum materials. Family literacy sessions were also a part of the research project.

One teacher would observe a group session in progress, taking notes on one certain focus for the day; for example, sociogram (flow of talk), on-task/off-task comments, all questions asked, or nonverbal cues. The teacher who did the teaching was responsible for writing a self reflection about the observed lesson. These two sets of notes were grouped together to be studied at a later date. Self reflections from unobserved groups were also used. Field notes were gathered from September through May. They were then compiled and studied for repeating patterns and problems.

To analyze our information, we first met to decide how to proceed. Then each of us read through all the information. Next we read everything again, this time looking for differences and similarities between teachers' self-reflections and observers' notes, interesting or surprising information, possible patterns, and so forth. These "hunches" sent us back into the information to see if we were right. For example, we noticed lots of references in observers' notes to students smiling and laughing, so we looked through the information again to see if our "hunch" was correct. It was.

We also calculated percentages when it made sense to do so, as with sociograms. Finally, we met together again to share what each of us had discovered individually and to develop our final list of findings.

Based upon these findings, we concluded--much to our surprise--that ABLE students truly enjoy working in groups. After we fully digested this startling piece of information, we then headed back to our notes to further prove that it was indeed true. (Perhaps we also felt we could prove this finding was wrong. After all, many ABLE teachers are more hesitant to teach a group than ABLE students are to participate in one.) Our next step was to methodically organize and profile our data into a compact summary that would highlight our findings.

RESULTS

According to the Random House College Dictionary one definition of the word enjoy is "to have and use with satisfaction, have the benefit of. . . ." With this definition in mind, we decided to focus on evidence of enjoyment because, we reasoned, for almost any group success to occur there must be human enjoyment. Our field notes reveal five principal indicators of enjoyment:

1. Participation
2. Human bonding
3. Positive increase in individual behavior
4. Motivation
5. Physical signs of enjoyment

PARTICIPATION

To begin, let's take a look at our first indicator - **participation**. Generally, where there is enjoyment there is positive energy as indicated by student participation, which includes discussion, debate, and the sharing and disclosure of feelings and experiences. However, based upon a survey given before their first group encounter, the two greatest fears among ABLE students about working in a group were 1) they would not "know" as much as the others, and 2) someone would laugh at them or make fun of them.

The groups began meeting, and the students realized that group was not going to be a place where their knowledge was going to be tested, but rather a place where they could learn new things together, learn from one another, and use their knowledge to work together with the other group members to solve problems. Their fears rapidly dissipated and were replaced by sincere enthusiasm.

The most obvious sign of enjoyment was the student participation level during group sessions. In 18 of 25 sessions there was 100% participation. In all 25 of these sessions participation levels were at 50% or above. Sometimes, to the discomfort of the teacher, a lot of off-task talk would occur - or so it seemed; however, in reviewing a sampling of the notes (6 observations), 60% of student talk was on-task. Perhaps even more encouraging was the fact that 85% of comments made during group sessions were made to the entire group. The students did not focus on the teacher or the individual sitting beside them when they made comments; they wanted to share their knowledge, experience, and beliefs with the entire group.

Even more exciting was the revelation that during a lesson on recycling, which involved a long-term experiment with simulated landfills, 100% of student talk was on-task. The students actively discussed the merits and the best methods of recycling and were instrumental in determining how the experiment would be conducted. One of the students even suggested the group write a letter to the local newspaper voicing their concerns about recycling in Portage County. As a group, the students also decided that a recycling program should be started at the center. After all, they reasoned, if they were not part of the solution then they were part of the problem. The fact that several students became argumentative and bullish in their opinions indicates their energy and the need for group interaction. This lesson alone exemplified many of the benefits of group learning: **active participation, motivation, human bonding, confidence building, critical thinking,** and **problem-solving skills**. It was a teacher's DREAM!

Another example of participation reflects the students' direct involvement with their educational goals. One group was reviewing the use of commas and semicolons; they were using the chalkboard to complete their exercises. After the session some of the students asked for more work on the subject matter. According to our field notes, this group asked on at least two different occasions if they could go back to the chalkboard. This same group was led on a scavenger hunt using the Akron Beacon Journal, which required them to use good reading skills, critical thinking, and math skills. Now let's face it, a large portion of our adult learners loathe doing math and reading exercises, and yet these students who were expected to use three cognitive skills at one time loved the scavenger hunt so much they repeatedly asked when they would be doing another one.

In our analysis of the aforementioned sessions, participation was based upon comments directly related to the subject matter. Many times students would need to discuss a problem they were having before they could focus on the day's lesson. SOS sessions always began with everyone in the group stating how he/she was feeling. If anyone had a problem, this was the time for him/her to discuss it. The students not only expected comfort and reassurance from the group, they also expected the group to provide them with some solutions. The feeling of security a person needs in order to share personal problems, dreams, and feelings leads us to the next sign of enjoyment: **human bonding**.

HUMAN BONDING

So many ABLE students lack social skills; they might not know how to interact with others or what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior in a group. As one student said, "You can be the smartest person in the world, but if you can't relate to others, where are you?" How true this statement is! No matter where our ABLE students go when they leave our programs, they will need to be able to relate to others if they want to be successful. The biggest benefit for the students who engaged in group activities was the bonding factor. It was this element that taught the students those all-important interpersonal and social skills that they will need to achieve their dreams.

Stories of achievement, love, birth, addiction, loss, and many forms of abuse were common in all of the groups, especially the SOS sessions. It was surprising how much participants were willing to share their private lives. This openness was more than a lack of social skills; it indicated a feeling of comfort and security within the confines of the group setting. It exemplified the need ABLE students have to interact with others. One student wrote very movingly about her experience of being raped and read her account to the group. As she cried, other eyes glistened with tears and arms were draped around her shoulders while verbal support was given. This woman's story wove a common thread among members of the group; they all had known some form of pain and suffering, and now they knew that they were not alone. The students were able to come to the conclusion that a person who experiences setback after setback can still dream of and achieve success.

Amazingly, this experience occurred on the group's first day together; it helped all of them to return the next day and the day after that. They had a reason to come to school. Friends were there, and these friends were pulling for them to be successful. Several participants wrote in their evaluations that they felt better about themselves because they heard others express feelings of fear, loneliness, and low self-confidence. It was rewarding to observe these different groups and rejoice in the bonds being formed and the empathy that grew among them. One group helped a fellow student move out of an abusive household and into a woman's shelter - all on their own time. With every new challenge, whether social or educational in nature, a change occurred in these students - **a positive change**.

POSITIVE INCREASE IN INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

As the sessions continued and the students familiarized themselves with one another, members' self-esteem increased. One woman in her forties finally spoke up one day in group and afterwards she exclaimed to her teacher, "I can't believe I talked in front of others." This woman normally stayed to herself during class time and had not formed many friendships. The joy and the confidence in her eyes at that moment cemented the teacher's belief that groups were indeed beneficial.

A similar moment occurred when a student who always tried her best to get out of attending group was working with a partner to solve a problem. The two of them had been struggling for a short time with the assignment; both had repeatedly asked the teacher how they were "supposed to do it." Neither one of the students believed that she had the knowledge needed to solve the problem. All of a sudden the solution hit the both of them, and they worked together to produce an end result. When they were finished, the reluctant student replied, "I think we did good." She did not mind coming to group after that.

Positive changes in individual behavior, particularly in confidence, attitude, and the willingness to speak and express themselves in front of others, were witnessed in the majority of students. This was certainly true with the JOBS clients. Remember, these individuals did not have any choice; not only were they required to attend school, they were also required to attend the SOS sessions. Needless to say, many of them came to group the first time withdrawn, glum, and with a bad attitude that could be felt a mile away. But as the group began to evolve, these negative expressions were replaced with smiles and vitality. They displayed a willingness to be there and to be an active member of the group.

MOTIVATION

As self-confidence grew, so did student **motivation**. During a family literacy session concerning the Christmas holiday, one

woman brought in her old copy of Dickens' A Christmas Carol to share with the group. Another suggested that not only should the family literacy group share book ideas for their children, they should also bring in books to share with each other. Better yet, a woman suggested the group have a book exchange of adult and children's books that parents no longer wanted. These ABLE students wanted to share their joy of reading. It was fantastic!

In the other groups, students would bring in newspaper clippings, magazine articles, or just their own bit of information about a topic that had been discussed during group. One woman brought in handouts to give to the students concerning child abuse awareness. Family literacy groups shared stories of their children and discipline strategies along with discussing the benefits of Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, and yes, Barney. It was sheer pleasure when a student came to the center and told how she had made pretzels with her son or to hear the parents say that they had made a bird feeder with their child.

The eagerness and pride on their faces as they shared their knowledge and experience was instant gratification for us, the teachers. The folks who we worried would never understand fractions or recognize the difference between a sentence and a fragment were becoming confident, independent learners and teachers; their behavior, actions, and words became a model for other participants to follow. As teachers, we were encouraged and enthused because we *knew* these students were learning, and even better, they were sharing their learning experience with others. These students were becoming empowered, and the effects of their empowerment allowed them to concentrate on the more difficult subjects because they now had the confidence and courage to accept any failure they might experience. They understood that failure was a part of success. One student even remarked, "I'm having fun here!"

The fun continued. These students who were once hesitant were now motivated learners. Not only would students approach their teachers and ask for specific topics to be taught in group, they would ask for additional information about a topic that had been discussed so they could strengthen their knowledge of the subject matter. After a lesson during Black history month, a student asked her teacher if she could borrow her copy of Uncle Tom's Cabin. The young woman returned it a few weeks later and thanked the teacher for the opportunity to read such an enlightening book. In her words, "It taught me a lot." One teacher had two students encourage her to keep reading aloud to them because they "loved it." What better positive reinforcement could a teacher want?

Perhaps the most significant motivating factor was the manner in which a group of strangers became a cohesive, critical-thinking, problem-solving entity. Students began taking responsibility for what was happening in group. If one student was out of line, another student corrected him/her. Students explained to newcomers how group worked, the types of things that were done in group, and when group took place. One student who had refused to attend group decided he was missing out on too much and became a regular, contributing member. Students would ask repeatedly, "What are we doing in group today?" or "What time is group?"

Students who were absent would ask the teacher or another student what had happened in group. Some students would even do the missed assignment and turn it in. In the beginning, group was a good way to "get out of doing this math," as so many students would fondly say, but in a matter of no time it became an anticipated part of their educational experience. Students did not complain when it was time for group; they planned their morning around group time. If group was at 10:00 AM, all the smokers exited the building at 9:45 for a cigarette break. We were pleased, but it did not

make the math teacher too happy, when a student said, "I can't take my math test now; group is going to start in 10 minutes." It was a joy to observe students who felt insecure about their academic abilities participate and contribute more with each passing day. This factor above all others motivated us to keep on going.

SIGNS OF ENJOYMENT

Perhaps the greatest **signs of enjoyment**, at least the most fun, were the physical displays. Too numerous to count is the only way to describe the times that students laughed, smiled, or giggled during group. Along with these signs, our notes reveal instances of kidding, teasing, and even flirting. During one session there was group applause. Another time, a student began applauding after each student finished giving an oral report. The group picked up on this and responded in the same manner. While we cannot prove it, we are positive that this type of icebreaker helped everyone relax and allowed the oral reports to be given without anyone running out of the center never to be seen again. Sometimes we wondered how much learning was taking place during group, and we shared our frustrations about what felt like a lot of idle chatter and off-task behavior; however, in organizing our research we realized that our groups had made a difference with the majority of these students. If we were asked if group learning should be included in all ABLE curricula, our answer would be a resounding "YES!"

CONCLUSION

Besides the things we have mentioned here, there were countless other indications in our notes of enjoyment for the students and for us. Perhaps the best way to end is to present another benefit of group learning: **satisfaction for the teacher.** To read and review the field notes was rewarding, especially the ones in which all student comments were recorded. Field notes made us realize how interesting and stimulating many of the group sessions were. For example, one entry recorded an SOS group sharing individual collages they had created. Discussing nature's power, love's mysteries, and the human race and its future on Earth were just a few of the topics investigated during the session.

All ABLE teachers love their jobs, but the truth is that many of us have to leave the field and explore other options because we need full-time work, benefits, or for any number of other reasons. Working with a group, while at times frustrating and time consuming, is also one of the most rewarding experiences a teacher can have. To those of you who do not have group now, start one. Keep self-reflections on how the lessons are going. We promise that you will be amazed at how rewarding it is to read your notes and remember all of the groups--the individuals and their personalities--and realize what a positive and powerful impact your efforts have had on your students.

Education is more than scores and ability levels. Let us remember the words of one student: "You can be the smartest person in the world, but if you can't relate to others where are you?"

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